

Cornell

How to Tackle: Essay Questions

The best way to prepare for essay tests is to practice writing essays!

- **Anticipate questions:** Make outlines of possible essay topics using your course materials so you know you've got a good grasp of what might be on the test. Then recreate your outlines from memory (unless it's an open-notes test).
- **Practice writing** at least one full essay; be mindful of the time you spend practicing and think about how much time you will have during the exam. It is also important to think about *how* you are organizing the information you are including in your essay — for example, if you are asked to compare and contrast two theories as they relate to an issue, you might want to define each of them, describe the issue, and then compare and contrast them.
- If your exam is closed book, **memorize key events, facts, and names** that you will need to support your argument. If it is open notes, then make sure you develop good outlines.

When you are taking essay tests:

- **Manage your time** well. As with all exams, if there are multiple essay questions, be sure to look at them all at the beginning (taking note of the points each is worth), and prioritize the order you answer the questions.
- **Read the directions** carefully. Ask yourself honestly: are you answering the *actual* question on the test, or the question you *want* to be on the test? (tip: instructors know when you aren't really answering the exact question, so make sure you are addressing the actual question and don't just write random information that is unrelated to the question.)
- Before you write the essay, **decide on your argument** and **quickly list your supporting evidence** (it is ok to do a brain dump of all the important information that you want to include so that you have it handy when you begin writing).
- **Make a quick outline** of what you are going to write to organize your thoughts and arguments.
- **Write! And, make your point right away**— you don't want to get to the end of a timed essay test with your amazing argument still unmade!
- If you have time, go back and quickly **proofread** your essay for errors.

Texas A & M

Essay Questions

Many students dread having to write essays as part of an exam. However, essay questions or exams consisting entirely of essays can be the most forgiving forms of testing because they're less limiting in how you can respond to a prompt. Generally, essay questions direct you about what type of essay you're expected to write and provide you with a prompt.

- Read the directions and the prompt carefully. Make sure you understand what type of essay you're being asked to write and that you understand the prompt. Pay close attention to the terms used in the prompt. Commonly, test questions will include terms like *analyze*, *evaluate*, *critique*, *compare and contrast*, *respond*, *synthesize* or *argue*. Make sure your answers conform to the requirements of the question. If you aren't clear about what you're being asked to do, ask your instructor.
- Make some notes before you begin writing. Include at least a thesis and an outline of major points that support your thesis.
- In an essay exam, you need to make a central claim and support that claim with evidence and reasoning. Your thesis statement is a short version of the central claim you are making. Use the prompt to help construct your essay. For example, if the prompt asks you to make an argument about the strategic importance of George Washington's crossing of the Delaware River in the American Revolution, write something like "George Washington's crossing of the Delaware was perhaps the single most significant strategic maneuver of the American Revolutionary War. It propelled the colonies to victory."
- Your outline should cover the points that support your thesis and provide you with guidance for topic sentences in each of your paragraphs.
- State your thesis at the beginning of your essay.
- Once you start composing your essay, skip lines to give yourself room to add or edit when you reread your draft.
- Use specific details from your course materials—textbook, the content of lectures and/or discussion, etc.—for evidence to support your points. Specificity is the key to crafting a convincingly persuasive essay.
- Include a conclusion that summarizes your thesis and main points if you have time.
- You have some leeway on written essays; your instructor isn't expecting perfection. But do the best you can on spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- Write as neatly as you can.
- Read your essay once you've finished; revise and edit where necessary. Don't be afraid to mark through some of your content and draw arrows to indicate reorganization if you have to.

COMMON TEST QUESTION TERMINOLOGY:

Argue – Take a stand on a debatable topic, using evidence and/or reasoning to support your claims.

List – Provide a numbered list of words, sentences, or comments

Outline – Organize a series of main ideas supported by secondary ideas, etc.

Define – Give the exact meaning of a term or concept, but no details; this is often a matter of giving a memorized definition

Criticize – Issue your own judgment or opinion based on reasons; good and bad points should be included

Summarize – Provide a brief, condensed account of the main ideas; omit non-essential details

Trace – Describe the progress or history of something or how something came to be from beginning to end

Describe – Explain, with details and examples, the subject the question is asking about. Imagine that you are painting a picture with words.

Diagram – Make a chart, graph, or geometric drawing with labels to explain an event, development, or phenomenon

Compare/contrast – Show, in detail the similarities (when comparing) and differences (when contrasting) between two things—events, developments, phenomena. Your goal is not just to state the similarities or differences, but to make a point about what we can learn from considering the similarities and differences.

Discuss – Consider or examine a topic or position by presenting contexts, pros and cons and/or differing views, with details

Justify – Support a position or decision by providing reasons and rationale

Analyze – Break a subject down into its component parts, describe or evaluate each, and describe the relationships among the parts.

Evaluate – Make a judgment about the value or effectiveness of something; defend your evaluation by establishing criteria by which you make the judgment